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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Mother's Union, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Mother's Union is a worldwide Christian organization with 4 million grass-roots members living in 84 countries, many in rural areas and the poorest countries of the world. Members volunteer their time to support family life and to empower women, through prayer, campaigning and enabling activities. While rural women are not one homogenous group, our rural members and the women in their communities face a number of common challenges throughout the course of their lives, as described below.

Health

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 1,000 women die each day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Of those women, 99 per cent die in the developing world. Maternal mortality is higher in rural areas, where women are less likely to receive adequate antenatal health care and more likely to be poor.

According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), of the 34 million people living with HIV/AIDS, 95 per cent live in the developing world. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, within those countries, more people living with HIV reside in rural areas, although accurate infection rates are hard to measure as cases are more likely to go unreported.

WHO reports that, across the world, 884 million people still lack access to safe water and, according to the United Nations Development Programme, millions of rural women and children spend several hours each day collecting water, often from distant and polluted sources.

Education

The World Bank reports that gender gaps in primary education have closed in almost all countries. In secondary education, these gaps are closing rapidly. Yet, according to the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*, hope dims for universal education by 2015, even as many poor countries make tremendous strides. Rural children are twice as likely to miss out on education as urban children and 31 per cent of rural girls are out of school, compared with 27 per cent of rural boys. Rates vary globally, but rural women are more likely than urban women to be illiterate.

Employment and income generation

In many parts of the world, casual work in agriculture provides the main employment opportunity for poor rural women. That work is often low paid, offers no social protection and poses greater risks to health. While rural women produce more than 55 per cent of all food grown in developing countries, the World Bank reports that they are less likely to own the land they farm. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development, trade liberalization and protectionist agricultural trade policies of the developed world continue to have a negative impact on the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in developing countries, who produce a third of the world's food.

Food security

Currently, 925 million people across the world are experiencing hunger. Oxfam reports that, out of those who are undernourished, around 80 per cent are thought to live in rural areas. It is also estimated that 60 per cent of the chronically hungry are women and girls.

Gender-based discrimination and violence

Estimates of gender-based violence vary across the world, but it affects women and girls in rural areas as much as in urban areas. In England and Wales, for example, a 2008 study by Bristol University and the National Federation of Women's Institutes found that 52 per cent of rural women and 56 per cent of urban women had experienced violence or abuse.

Transport

Accessing water, food, health care, education and employment is dependent on a decent transport infrastructure, including land, water and air pathways. It is also important in enabling access to decision-making power, as local and national Governments are usually based in urban cities, towns and villages. Older and poorer women are particularly disadvantaged by lack of public transport.

Health and education inequalities, poverty, hunger, discrimination and isolation are all barriers to rural women's empowerment. Members of Mother's Union run a number of projects and programmes that help remove such barriers and thus enable women and their families to flourish. Through a literacy and financial education programme in Burundi, Malawi, the Sudan and South Sudan, trained facilitators bring together and lead literacy circles, teaching women and men literacy and numeracy skills using participatory learning methods. During the process, the participants, approximately 70 per cent of whom are female, discuss issues affecting their communities; build self-confidence and capacity to self-organize; and, once literate, are also trained to form savings and credit groups. The loans, savings and budgeting training enable many group participants to develop new businesses, most of which tend to be agriculture based, for example trading in plants, growing vegetables, raising goats and chickens and selling agricultural produce. The activities have resulted in a higher and more stable income for many of the rural women participating in the programme. Throughout the programme, participants also discuss gender roles, for example, by analysing how men and women spend their time each day, in order to highlight the inequalities women face and to challenge the social norms that perpetuate such inequalities. That sensitization has led to improved family relationships for participants and to women participating more actively in their communities.

In Uganda, a family life programme aims to fight poverty and sickness within rural communities. Mother's Union development workers and family life trainers bring together local groups to help them identify issues affecting their well-being, such as health problems and environmental degradation, and ways to bring about change and improvements in their community. Solutions include building pit latrines and simple hand-washing facilities, planting fruit and vegetable gardens and building energy efficient stoves. Family life groups have also set up model homes across 10 regions to demonstrate their innovations. Groups are also set up to meet

the needs of particular cohorts, such as groups for women only, men only, young people, those with disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS.

To further the empowerment of rural women, the underpinning value of equality between women and men must also be upheld through international agreements, national law and local custom. Learning from practical experience, Mother's Union believes that policies must be put in place, from the local to the global level, to eliminate the health and education inequalities, poverty, hunger, discrimination and isolation that disproportionately affect women.

Mother's Union recommends that national Governments should:

(a) Improve and expand local services and resources in rural areas in the areas of:

- Health, by opening more, sufficiently resourced, accessible health-care facilities with trained doctors, nurses and midwives; and improving treatment and awareness of HIV/AIDS and other common diseases.
- Education, by continuing to work towards achieving Goals 2 and 3 of the Millennium Development Goals; and providing or funding quality, accessible adult education and skills training relevant to the rural and wider national context.
- Work and income generation, by ensuring the rights of women to own land and property; supporting and promoting women's access to credit, enterprise and other resources; supporting the diversification of employment in rural areas; and investing in quality, affordable childcare provision during and around working hours.
- Ending violence against women, by ensuring as a matter of priority that the justice system is accessible to rural women; and funding quality, accessible support services for victims of gender-based violence.

(b) Invest in local and national infrastructures that underpin services, by:

- Involving rural women in the planning and leadership of infrastructure development to ensure it will meet women's needs.
- Investing in sustainable transport networks with an affordable cost to rural service users.
- Investing in adequate water and sanitation systems.

(c) Tackle global inequalities, by:

- Committing to fair and sustainable systems of international trade, particularly in relation to agriculture and food processing.
- Committing to achieving the Millennium Development Goals in rural areas.